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NEA/MAG (WILLIAMS AND STEWART)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESSES EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS
DIRECTOR ON RELEASING SLIM BOUKHDHIR; EMBASSY INTERACTIONS

REF: TUNIS 790

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In a meeting Friday, July 18, Ambassador pressed Tunisian External Communications Agency Director General Oussama Romdhani on the release of imprisoned journalist Slim Boukhdhir. Romdhani acknowledged that the continued imprisonment of Boukhdhir is a problem for Tunisia internationally, and carries a cost. The Ambassador also expressed strong concern to Romdhani about the GOT's increasing control of contact between Embassy and Tunisian officials and the absence of a GOT response to Embassy proposals. The Ambassador made clear the current system is impeding US-Tunisian relations. Romdhani acknowledged the problem and offered to help in some specific areas. End Summary.

Time to release Boukhdhir

¶2. (C) In a 90 minute meeting on Friday, July 18, Ambassador discussed three issues with Tunisian External Communications Agency (ATCE) Director General Oussama Romdhani:
-- the continued imprisonment of Slim Boukhdhir;
-- the difficulty the Embassy and the international community have in doing business with the GOT; and,
-- the upcoming RCD party Congress.

¶3. (C) On Boukhdhir, the Ambassador noted that President Ben Ali has historically released prisoners in honor of Republic Day (July 25). The Ambassador suggested the GOT release Boukhdhir, noting that continuing to imprison the journalist was having an effect on relations. Boukhdhir's imprisonment, he said, is a growing issue in Washington and in Europe. Romdhani acknowledged that Boukhdhir's imprisonment was an issue and carries a cost. He noted that it was a particular concern with human rights groups, citing the Committee to Protect Journalists. He said, however, that Boukhdhir was prone to overreaction and to violence, noting that "anywhere in the world attacking a policeman is a crime." The Ambassador reiterated that the GOT should release Boukhdhir. Romdhani acknowledged the request.

¶4. (C) Romdhani asked about the US views on members of an-Nahdha who remain in prison. The Ambassador responded that if they were in prison for their political views, and not for having committed acts of violence, then they should be released.

Interacting with the GOT

¶5. (C) The Ambassador expressed to Romdhani the frustration

of the Embassy, and of many in the international community, over the increasing difficulty of interacting with the GOT and obtaining responses to proposals. The Ambassador said the Embassy had to send every request or demarche by diplomatic note, and that it was often impossible for Embassy officials to obtain meetings. As an example, he noted that the Embassy's human rights officer had been waiting for more than a year for a meeting with an official at the Ministry of Justice. The Ambassador continued that the Embassy had proposed meetings with GOT officials to discuss the programming of the \$1.2 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), so far without response. The Embassy was also waiting for approval of this year's US Fulbright Scholars. The cumbersome, bureaucratic system the GOT uses to control interactions of GOT and Embassy officials, the Ambassador said, is impeding relations.

¶16. (C) Romdhani asked the Ambassador several questions about the restrictions imposed by the GOT, notably on the delay in approving the Fulbright scholars. He indicated he would intervene with the Ministry of Higher Education in an effort to obtain approval for their work. He also admitted that obstructing or delaying appointments for US officials with GOT officials made little sense. Romdhani said that failing, for example, to give the Embassy's human rights officer an appointment at the Ministry of Justice just ensured the Embassy did not have the GOT's perspective.

RCD Party Congress

¶17. (C) The Ambassador asked if President Ben Ali would announce his candidacy for President in 2009 at the upcoming

RCD Party Congress. Romdhani indicated that "no one knows," adding that anyone who claimed to know was not telling the truth. He also noted that there are many unsubstantiated rumors of a cabinet reshuffle around the time of the party congress.

Comment

¶18. (C) We were pleased with the release of Slim Boukhdhir from prison on Monday, July 21, which we attribute to the rising international pressure. We provide background and comment on the release in a septel.

¶19. (C) On doing business with the GOT, this was not the first discussion the Ambassador and Romdhani have had on the issue, but it was the longest and most detailed. It follows on the heels of the Ambassador raising the issue at a meeting at MDIC (reftel), along with the British and Canadian Ambassadors. The Ambassador will raise this issue with other senior GOT officials soon. Whether GOT officials change current practice, it is essential they understand the suffocating policies on interaction are undermining our ability to advance relations.

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